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## REVIEWS

### BOOK

**Seeds in the Garden of Letters:  
A Review of *The End of National Cinema* by Patrick F. Campos**

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It would be easy to subject a text like Patrick F. Campos's *The End of National Cinema* to critical reservation, given the scope of the material and the magnitude of the challenges it sets out to confront. Subtitled *Filipino Film at the Turn of the Century*, the book is definitely the most voluminous debut publication by any Filipino film practitioner, weighing in at 665 pages (including bibliography and index) plus thirteen preliminary pages. Unlike a few initial film books, however, *The End of National Cinema* (hereafter *ENC*) is neither a dramatic work nor a celebrity appreciation; it resembles the more typical product, a compilation of film reviews and criticism—except in this case, what we get is a surprisingly small total of nine articles, ten if we include the similarly lengthy introduction. For 550 compact pages of body text, this works out to an average of fifty-five pages per article, a fact that makes possible one more distinction for the book: it actually is a personal anthology—but of monographs, rather than articles.

An awareness of the complete life cycle of the academic paper might help us better appreciate Campos's project. An author would typically draft one for a class or seminar, present it at conferences (preferably published in proceedings), submit it to a journal, and offer it afterward to an anthology of similar material; once the author has made a name, she may decide to compile her articles in one volume in order to provide researchers with the equivalent convenience of a one-stop shop for her material. With *ENC*, Campos in effect skipped the stage of handing out his journal-published papers to appear in various volumes, thus making himself vulnerable to the question of what authority he had in assuming that he could start out in such a grand manner.

At this point I will have to disclose that I recognized two of the *ENC* articles, the first (post-intro) and the last one, as Campos's contributions to special journal collections that I had edited. The first, "Ishmael Bernal's *Manila by Night* as Thirdspace," was so innovative and forward-looking that I knew it would make a near-perfect closing piece for the issue. The rest of the chapters deal with auteurs, specifically Mike de Leon in Chapter 2 and Kidlat Tahimik in Chapter 3; the Cinemalaya Philippine Independent Film Festival and its attendant Film Congress in Chapter 4; filmic topographies divided between urban realism in Chapter 5 and rural landscapes in Chapter 6; and cinematic imaginaries focused on folklore in Chapter 7, historical memory in Chapter 8, and ghost narratives in Chapter 9. Despite Campos's disavowal of any linearly constructed design, one can already perceive here some gestures toward expanding the book's coverage, from traditional local concerns (auteurs and film events) to transnational films and issues. In *ENC*'s introductory essay, after which the book is titled, Campos articulates his argument that national cinema is at an "end"—not so much in terms of the virtually complete phaseout of celluloid production, but rather in the sense that Philippine cinema can be better understood in relation to political and cultural developments in the larger Southeast Asian region and its interaction with Western-determined and -dominated global cinema. His final deployment of the term "end"—as a call to alertness to the purpose of discourses on national cinema—affirms his claim that *ENC* was not in itself meant to provide any definitive kind of closure.

In fact, the book best functions as a quite effective starting point for any film devotee who seeks to discover the contemporary concerns of Filipino film scholarship. I would not suggest that the casual reader run through everything in it in one go (although I had to do exactly that in order to provide a review), and Campos, not surprisingly, makes the same recommendation. Yet the act of finishing the chapters in brisk succession allowed me the advantage of drawing up a list of urgent research tasks in my mind, with the pleasure (and, to be honest, the frustration) of finding *ENC* carefully and methodically tackling each item on the list.

Not every attempt in *ENC* is as resounding a success as the first chapter, but the ones that work demonstrate Campos's ability to evaluate a research challenge and formulate a compelling strategy as his response. The Mike de Leon chapter evinces his training in film and literature in his patiently close comparative readings of the director's output, but his Kidlat Tahimik article breaks down the academically prescribed distance between author and artist, and provides exceptional readings that are enhanced by the access that the director, his family, and his hometown granted him. In conducting survey-like introductions to the

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other, later chapters, Campos similarly manages to highlight crucial similarities and differences in groups of films—an exercise that can sometimes be let down by any film collection that cannot make sufficiently significant contributions beyond belonging to a notable, novel, and rarely covered area (which is what happens in his discussion of rural-set digital-era titles [Campos 366-407]).

At a certain point in perusing the volume, I realized I could also name-check the several active critics and scholars—including, again for proper disclosure, myself—who emerged (or, in my case, re-emerged) since the book's coverage, the turn of the century. At the same time, I initially appreciated Campos's desistance from critiquing his colleagues (who, after all, would also be his rivals), but I started getting the impression that his citations would eventually amount to merely a comprehensive review of related literature. At about this point, almost midway through the book, he brings up a startlingly irresponsible remark made by a major culture official, at that time the dean of his college at the national university, during a Cinemalaya Film Congress (Campos 241), to the effect that independent films should reject "Hollywood" strategies (e.g., suturing) as well as their "middle-class" audiences, and proceed to elevate the mass audience's film preferences by resorting to alternative aesthetics, as exemplified by the alienating devices and durationally extreme output of Lav Diaz (Tolentino, "Indie Cinema ..."). In dismantling the aforementioned position's premises in the next few paragraphs, the critique Campos performs is subtle, constructive, elegant, and firmly rooted in lived experience, so much so that I found myself looking forward to (and dreading) the time when he would begin clearing more space for his own ideas by being more firmly selective about existent abstractions in and on Philippine cinema.

*ENC* is, therefore, a conceptual coup, ambitious in providing an overview of scholarly urgencies in contemporary Philippine film studies, modest and painstaking in pursuit of its objectives, ingenious in re-imagining problems that do not seem to promise much in the way of providing conclusive answers, so that these become worthy of careful consideration. At one point, Campos juxtaposes two historians and uncovers an exceptional instance where Renato Constantino, the more avowedly Marxist author, falls short compared to Zeus Salazar, in terms of their discourses on Philippine popular culture (Campos 420-21). In two other separate instances, he astutely points out how two filmmakers usually touted as Lino Brocka's heirs—Kidlat Tahimik (for his international recognition) and Jeffrey Jeturian (for his movies on the urban underclass)—are actually closer in spirit, by virtue of their use of humor and intellectual distance, to Ishmael Bernal (Campos 155, 290). In fact, given *ENC*'s consistently clear-eyed and occasionally brilliant insights, lay readers may find it difficult, if not impossible, to perceive whatever errors or inconsistencies the book may have.<sup>1</sup>

After finishing the volume, one could reconsider the author's introduction—disparaged by an early reviewer (Mai 306) as leading to material that Campos addresses only toward the end—and realize that it in effect constitutes a study plan that extends beyond the coverage of the text. *ENC* thereby functions as Campos's scholarly mission statement as well as his proof of qualifications. Each of the chapters could serve as a blueprint for a sustained thesis-length effort, and if all other scholars of Philippine cinema suddenly and simultaneously turn inactive right now for whatever reason, film studies in the country will still be able to proceed on the strength of Campos's forthcoming contributions.

I would prefer, however, to suggest one further direction, one that we can glean from Campos's timely correction of his senior's conflicted bias (mentioned earlier) regarding art and populism. In *ENC*, the closest that Campos comes to any recent mainstream output is in the chapter wherein he inspected the folkloric roots of the *Enteng Kabisote* series. I regard this to be as noteworthy by academic standards as the rest of the book. But while thereby insightful, the argument that the films hinged on the ethnoepic tradition (specifically the Sulod *Labaw Donggon* saga) would have minimal bearing on the movies' stature as Christmas-festival audience-pleasers, from the perspective of its makers and consumers. It were as if Campos still needed to step away from film-specific approaches like generic pleasure, narrative design, and multimedia star construction even when these quotidian concerns already inhered in the texts' blockbuster status and demanded to be taken almost exclusively in those terms. An even more extensive area of practice—what could arguably be the “real” Philippine cinema in terms of audience attendance and box-office results—would be the romantic comedies that have become the closest to a surefire guarantee of return on investment in local film production since the turn of the century. Campos's determination to pursue national cinema to its ends, beyond the limits of medium, technology, geography, and period, would provide him with the kind of handle that he wielded when he started the book by discussing *Manila by Night*, a movie packaged as a mainstream commercial release during its time. To extrapolate from *ENC*, the movement he seems to be making—from periphery to exterior—would yield greater benefits if the center became his ultimate long-term target.

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> Since the chapters were intended to be capable of existing independent of one another, a question such as the zero-point of digital cinema yields varying responses. Campos first mentions Jon Red's *Still Lives* (1999), then Mike de Leon's *Bilanggo sa Dilim* (1986), then Cris Pablo's *Duda* (2003) in different chapters (1, 98, and 236 respectively); all three are of course valid entries depending on how “first” is defined. Only one name, Ditto Sarmiento (actually Abraham Jr., hence the term “ditto”), is written as “Lito” (99), and only one picture, from Raymond Red's 1984

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short "Hikab," is mistakenly presented as a still from Red's 1983 debut "Ang Magpakailanman" (230). The text also uses "self-reflexive" apparently to mean "reflexive," from a popular semantic slippage (reflexive meaning self-reflective). On the other hand, on the basis of a single run-through, there is a total of zero errors in the use of cultural and film-technological terms, including that of "reification," a word occasionally misapplied by a prominent authority in the field.

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